An Idea of Flaubert: 'Plato's Letter'

Jacques Derrida

My Loulou,

I have nothing to tell you, except that I miss you and want to see you very much.

N.B. . . . I am pleased to see my old pupil devote herself to serious reading. As for my opinion on these matters, here it is in a word: I don't know what the two substantives, *Matter* and *Spirit,* mean; we don't know the one any better than the other. Perhaps they are only abstractions of our intellect. In short, I consider Materialism and Spiritualism *equally impertinent.*

Ask Monseigneur to lend you Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedo,* in Cousin's translation. Since you love the ideal, my Loulou, you will discover it, in these books, at its very source. As art, it's marvellous.

It is March 1868 and Flaubert is writing to his niece, Caroline. He capitalizes the grand words of philosophy, Matter and Spirit. Like a good pedagogue, he also underlines what he feels is most important, the very substance of his argument: "*equally impertinent.*"[1] Caroline, twenty-two, is the daughter of Flaubert's sister and bears the same name. As you know, she was born in 1846, a month before the death of her mother and namesake. That same year, several months after the birth of Caroline, nicknamed Loulou, and thus after the death of her mother, there occurred the encounter with Louise Colet and the latter's break-up with Victor Cousin, whom Flaubert quickly dubs the Philosopher, with a capital P. In late August of that same year, Louise sends Flaubert a love-letter from the Philosopher, which she might be said to have

[1] "*deux impertinences égales.*" Materialism and Spiritualism are "impertinent" in both senses of that word: they are "not pertinent" or "irrelevant," but also "presumptuous," "insolent," "meddlesome." Later in this text, Derrida will explicitly define "impertinence" as "naive incompetence," a usage which is far better sustained by the original French *impertinence* than by its English homonym.—Trans.

forwarded as a sign of her fidelity or as a solemn vow. Flaubert thanks her for it. Only a few days beforehand, on August 11, 1846, he had written her the following (and I would emphasize the "stones"): "You would make a dead man fall in love. How can I help loving you? You have a power of attraction to make *stones* stand on end at the sound of your voice. . . ." And then he acknowledges receipt of the letter and thanks her: "Thank you for sending the Philosopher's letter. I understand the meaning of this gesture. You are paying me another tribute by making this sacrifice in my honor. It is as if to say: 'Here is another that I cast at your feet. Look how little he means to me, for it's you that I love.' You give me everything, poor angel" (8/24/46).

You may wonder whether I am not already skirting my original topic, *Flaubert and Philosophy*. You may then ask whether I might not try to substitute, at the expense of a few misdirected letters, a new topic, *Flaubert and the Philosopher,* so as to lose myself, or take refuge, in some tale of interminable letter-exchanges, of family drama, or of an impossible desire—who knows?—for the sister or the daughter, for the child or the daughter who is the sister's namesake, and so on. In fact, for such a substitution to have been possible, one would have had to have been able, first, to identify or situate a topic such as *Flaubert and Philosophy,* and then quite simply to imagine treating it given far more time than I have here. But can a topic like *Flaubert and Philosophy* take place anywhere but in the whole of Flaubertian space? By that expression, I mean neither to assume the unity of an idiom nor to suppose that Flaubert's relationship to philosophy can be circumscribed; that relationship is neither absolutely singular nor strictly identifiable, nor can it be immune from the most contradictory utterances. For the moment I say "Flaubertian" as one advances a working hypothesis, naming thereby a corpus *received* under this name as under a legal sign; this corpus is composed of the works and the letters, as well as of all that we naively accept under the rubric of Flaubert's bibliographical, biographical, and autobiographical context. To start we have made ourselves at home in the space of the *received* Flaubert;[2] my intent would be to situate, within that space, a relation-

[2] "le *reçu* flaubertien." This phrase should be read to denote the body of received ideas (*idées reçues*) about Flaubert; an accepted version of his life, work, opinions and poetics; and, by extension, the range of facts admissible as evidence (*recevable* in the legal sense) within the institutions of literary history and criticism. Also, perhaps, a written acknowledgement of goods received—"the Flaubertian receipt."—Trans.

ship to the philosophical as such, but not—at least for the moment—a relationship to Philosophy or to the Philosopher.

So I find myself in a common place, among received ideas. You know how contradictory the profound evaluation of the commonplace and the received idea can be in Flaubert; or rather, how indecisive, how ambivalent—the same affect being often imbued with both attraction and repulsion. Now what is called philosophy is never separated from tradition. In philosophy, the delivery, transmission and reception of ideas, coded arguments and classifiable responses or solutions lends itself more readily to stereotyping than anywhere else. This susceptibility to stereotyping is paradoxically not incompatible with the requirement, which no philosopher willingly renounces, to be critical or anti-dogmatic. Even in action, this critical vigilance must give rise to *ideas,* to what has been called *the idea* from Plato to Hegel, from the "source" of all ideality in Platonism, as Gustave reminds Loulou. Ideas are also fixed forms (and among all the ideas amassed in the idea of the idea, it is that of form, of the *Eidos* or formal contour, that will inevitably detain Flaubert). In philosophy, these fixed forms join together into a system, becoming eminently reproducible, identical to themselves, and by that right legally admissible [*recevable*] and received [*reçu*]. No amount of critical vigilance will keep philosophy—as the history of the idea or the history of ideas, from Plato to Hegel—from becoming, where its tradition is most alive, a vast circulation par excellence, an unending procession of received ideas, the encyclopedia of commonplaces. This encyclopedia may be alive and critical; but insofar as it generates and preserves ideas, it carries within itself its own necrosis. Sartre writes, in discussing none other than Flaubert, "the first instance of stupidity is the Idea become matter, or matter mimicking the Idea." Perhaps this statement should be made more incisive by noting that this becoming-matter impatiently lies in wait for ideality; it takes possession of the very form of the idea at its first moment, and in its first degree. Hence the attraction to stupidity, as well as that stupidity of the most lucid of minds. Hence also the equal impertinence of materialism and spiritualism when they come to oppose one another. A certain idealism, as perhaps we shall see, is another story entirely.

This is why we find the most explicit, if not the least equivocal, declarations and proclamations on the subject of philosophy in *Bouvard and Pécuchet,* in the *Dictionary of Received Ideas,* and also in the correspondence; that is to say, in annexes to the work proper [*des lieux hors-d'oeuvre*] or at least in those texts that mimic litera-

ture's annexes, abounding in the discourse of knowledge on the subject of knowledge, even in metalanguage on language itself, and most notably on Flaubert's own literary project. On the margins of Flaubert's work, philosophy—or in any event a certain discourse of the Idea—is put to the test in order to speak about literature, about the literature signed Flaubert, beyond the philosophical. And put to that test in vain, as we shall see.

Our difficulty at present is not simply that we have very little time at our disposal; it is that we don't really know what to look for under the heading of a "relationship to the philosophical."

And thus we do not know where to look, even if we wanted to settle down comfortably, as I put it a moment ago, in the received idea. Will it be a question of Flaubert's relationship to philosophy as a discipline or titular tradition, recognizable by the names of the great philosophers, their works and their systems? Will it be a question of Flaubert's declared philosophy, the set of all his phrases or themes that would seem classifiable as philosophical in type? (But how does one recognize this type? This is a formidable problem.) Finally, will it be a question of something like an implicit philosophy at work in Flaubert's practice of writing, or in a project one might call literary, fictional, novelistic, or poetic? (Does such an implicit philosophy exist? Is it not precisely here that the philosophical oversteps its bounds? By what sign is this recognizable?) Depending upon the privilege granted to one or the other of these three questions, a different area of the corpus—in all three cases, a very rich one—will present itself for examination. The most ambitious question of all is one I hardly dare formulate; but in time it would be entitled to an absolute priority. It would touch on a relationship to philosophy that would be irreducible to any one of the three types or places and yet which would order the secret law of their unity. What I shall venture here in the name of Flaubert's historical relationship to the Idea will perhaps be oriented by this question, but will by no means provide an answer to it.

Even if we wanted to flee the greatest of our difficulties by doubling back onto the received idea in its most received form, beginning with what Flaubert says of philosophy as a received idea in the *Dictionary,* we would find no rest. And for at least two reasons. First, the idea itself is not in the catalogue; the idea is not pinned down and displayed as an object or theme capable of provoking acts of stereotypy. The idea does not appear in the series of received ideas. This may be a sign: Flaubert—who uses the word

"idea" thousands of times, always appealing to a different facet of its meaning according to his context or momentary intention—took note of the fact that the sovereign Idea could not give rise, by reason of its authority, to an ironic objectification or parodic citation. The "ideal" on the other hand—that word which appears in the letter to Loulou (you who love the ideal, you will discover it at its source, in Plato, as translated by the Philosopher)—does figure as a received idea: "*Ideal.* Completely useless." So too do the words "metaphysics" and "philosophy." Both appear relegated to being ridiculous and laughable. But one never knows who speaks in the *Dictionary,* and that is precisely the point of the received idea. He who formulates a received idea as such does not let on whether he himself subscribes to it or would simply mock those who do; whether he speaks the idea *itself* or just speaks *of it,* speaking of it as others speak of it or as that of which others speak, so that in the end no one any longer dares to speak.[3] Thus, under *Metaphysics:* "laugh at it: gives an air of (and so proves) mental superiority." Then under *Philosophy:* "Should always be snickered at." Is it Flaubert who speaks his mind here? As with any question on the philosophical in Flaubert, this can be answered with both a *yes* and a *no,* with as much evidence on either side. Such pivoting between *yes* and *no* makes the initial question impertinent; it precludes our considering any Flaubertian utterance whatsoever as an annex to the work [*un hors-d'oeuvre*] belonging to a metalinguistic, theoretical or philosophical type. Not even that letter to Bouilhet (September 4, 1950), where he speaks of a Preface to the *Dictionary,* and hence of a so-called explicative presentation, which would be "contrived in such a way that the reader would not know whether his leg were being pulled, yes or no." One must not know; one must not be able to conclude, even on the topic of stupidity, which consists in "wanting to conclude." What is stupid about philosophy, what makes it both ridiculous and fascinating for Flaubert, is that it wants to conclude, to decide *whether-yes-or-no,* one way or the other. It is in this same letter that Flaubert heaps sarcasms upon Auguste Comte's *Positive Philosophy,* a "socialist book" that is "overwhelmingly stupid": "It contains vast mines of comedy, whole Californias of the grotesque. Perhaps there is something else to it as

[3] "There would have to be not a single word of my own invention in the entire book. If properly done, anyone who had read it would no longer dare open his mouth, for fear of spontaneously uttering one of its pronouncements" (to Louise Colet, December 17, 1852).

well. It's just possible." And further down: "*Ineptitude consists in wanting to conclude.* . . . it is not understanding the twilight; it is wanting only midnight or noon. . . . Yes, stupidity consists in wanting to conclude."

In its very grotesquery, the essential stupidity of the philosophical exerts a properly diabolical fascination on Flaubert, a fascination which orients all aspects of his life and work. It dictated his avid yet nauseated acquisition of philosophical culture, a process of erudition whose bibliographic instruments, stages, handbooks, and autodidactic fervor are now well known. A fascination and a temptation, in the most dangerous of that word's senses. The temptation of Saint Antoine is also the temptation of the philosophical. From the beginning, Antoine speaks of his "hatred" for the "claims of the philosophers"; Hilarion soon takes him to task for such impatient scorn. The most terrifying affirmations, such as when Clement of Alexandria declares that "Matter is eternal," are drawn from a hoard of those philosophical propositions that most tantalized Flaubert, above all those of Spinoza,[4] the Spinoza of the *Ethics* and particularly of the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus.*[5] Flaubert's admiration for Spinoza was hyperbolic. If we had the time, we could uncover a panoply of Spinozisms in the devil's discourse at the end of the *Temptation.* This discourse is not purely Spinozist: it is not homogeneous in this respect, but it has recourse

[4] "Speaking of Spinoza (that great man!), try to obtain the biography written by Boulainvilliers. It is in the Leipzig edition in Latin. I believe Emile Saisset has translated the *Ethics.* You must read that. Mme Coignet's article in the *Revue de Paris* was really quite incompetent. Yes, you must read Spinoza. Those who accuse him of atheism are asses. Goethe said, 'When I am upset or troubled I reread the *Ethics.*' Perhaps like Goethe you will find calm in the reading of this great book. Ten years ago I lost the friend I had loved more than any other, Alfred Le Poittevin. Fatally ill, he spent his last nights reading Spinoza" (to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie, 11/4/57).

[5] Flaubert will discover the *Tractatus* in 1870. "I knew Spinoza's *Ethics,* but not the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus.* The book astounds me; I am dazzled, and transported with admiration. My God, what a man! what an intellect! what learning and what spirit!" (to George Sand, April–May, 1870). Doesn't this eager autodidact speak with precisely the accent of Bouvard and Pécuchet?

The same year, and again to George Sand: "I have resolved to begin work on my *Saint Antoine* tomorrow or the day after. . . . These past few days I have read a lot of tedious theology, interspersed with some Plutarch and Spinoza . . ." (7/2/70). "Recently, I have spent my evenings reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in Barni's translation and going over my Spinoza . . ." (February, 1872). "If only I don't botch Saint Antoine as well. I shall return to it in a week, when I have finished with Kant and Hegel. These two great men have gone a long way towards stupefying me; when I take leave of them, it is with voracity that I pounce on my old, three times great Spinoza. What a genius! What a book the *Ethics* is!" (end of March, 1872).

to schemata recognizable from the *Ethics*. The devil, to be sure, is no atheist; no one is less atheistic than the devil. But he does not deny God's extension and thus substance any more than Spinoza does; Antoine is terrified at this thought, just as he is overwhelmed by the total dehumanization of a God who, to be free of all anthropomorphic subjectivity, must be without love or anger, feeling or form, providence or purposiveness. The devil is no more an atheist than Spinoza, and Flaubert says that all those who "accuse" Spinoza of atheism are "asses." But he plays this Spinoza off against religion and its forms of imagination, against the illusions of figures (rhetorical and otherwise) in the politics of religion; and in this regard, the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* is even more important than the *Ethics*. Flaubert discovers the *Tractatus* in 1870, as he works on the *Temptation*. The book, he says, "dazzles" and "astounds" him; he is "transported with admiration." In a moment, I shall venture a hypothesis on the privileged place of Spinoza in Flaubert's library or philosophical dictionary, as well as in his philosophical entourage, for his first impulse is always one of admiration for Spinoza the man ("My God, what a man! what an intellect! what learning and what spirit!" "What a genius!"). Perhaps this impulse reveals the spontaneity and the slightly naive astonishment of an amateur autodidact, but it also bespeaks an assurance (I shall return to this point) that the system is fundamentally just a work of art, reflecting first and foremost the artist's power. By this gesture, Flaubert shows himself a brother to Nietzsche.

Spinoza's place is equally curious in what I shall call, with Bouvard and Pécuchet, their philosophical "reading room." What happens in this *cabinet de lecture* would merit years of analysis; still, if the comic quality of Bouvard and Pécuchet resides not in their incompetence or stupidity (generally speaking, they are devoid of both), but rather in a certain acceleration, in a certain rhythm to their philosophical assimilation, in the speed with which they examine, manipulate, and substitute ideas, systems, proofs, and so on . . . then, by writing in this rhythm, I am caricaturing them. I shall thus limit myself to a scansion within their philosophical epic, beginning with their return to books, when they "take out a new subscription to a lending library." They do so, coincidentally enough, to answer Loulou's question. Or in their words: "What then is matter? What is spirit? How does one influence the other, and vice versa?" Not insignificantly, this covers the two penultimate chapters of the manuscript. In the final chapter, when they take

up education, they will start by telling each other that "all metaphysical ideas must be banished." But they already know this is not easy. To be sure, nearly at the end of their encyclopedic rounds they had already admitted that they "were tired of philosophers. So many systems confuse you. Metaphysics is useless. One can live without it." A moment later, however, they are forced to acknowledge that "metaphysics kept on returning." It is all the more difficult to abandon metaphysics since "philosophy magnified their self-esteem." And so, in the course of their passage through the philosophical, they are struck by the madness of a quintessentially philosophical *and* anti-philosophical desire; they conceive the mad project of *seeing stupidity itself.* Nothing is more stupid than the very understanding of this desire in which they themselves specialize. "Their obvious superiority caused offense. As they maintained immoral theses, they must have been immoral; calumnies were invented. Then a lamentable faculty developed in their minds, that of noticing stupidity and finding it intolerable." Among the immoral theses they had just developed, several emphasized a denial of Providence, which again harks back to Spinoza, while others—such as "Vices are properties of nature"—flaunt a certain disregard for morality, thus opening up a reference to Sade, who is never wholly absent from the Flaubertian landscape.[6] But I shall dwell here only on Spinoza's exceptional place in Bouvard and Pécuchet's philosophical procession. Everything in this accelerated theoretical exercise is assimilated, digested, and left behind, except Spinoza. For Spinoza is the point of greatest fascination; the locus of the greatest temptation, but also of a terror which renders him unattainable, distant, inassimilable. His work is too much: too strong and too beautiful. When Bouvard obtains Saisset's translation of the *Ethics,* which Flaubert recommends in one of his letters, they quickly take fright. "The *Ethics* frightened them with its axioms and corollaries. They read only the passages marked in pencil, and understood as follows. . . ." The text then recites phrases from the *Ethics,* punctuated at one point by Pécuchet's "Oh, that would be splendid!"; phrases they more or less under-

[6] We know that Flaubert was an avid reader of Sade, though he always kept a distance from this author who, for him, represented the hyperbole of Catholicism. Cf. what he says of Sade to the Goncourt brothers (quoted in J.-P. Richard, *Littérature et sensation: Stendhal, Flaubert* [Paris: Seuil, 1954], 195). From another point of view, he defended himself against what Sainte-Beuve had called his "touch of sadistic imagination" (Cf. his letter to Sainte-Beuve of December, 1862).

stand but which prove to be "too much for them": "They felt as if they were in a balloon, at night, in icy cold, borne away in endless flight to a bottomless abyss, with nothing around them but the incomprehensible, the immobile, the eternal. It was too much for them. They gave up." To this shrinking in terror from the *Ethics* corresponds the sense of abomination that marks a later passage inspired by the *Tractatus*. The curé asks Bouvard where he had uncovered such "splendid things": "—In Spinoza. The name made the curé jump. —Have you read him?" Bouvard reassures him, "God forbid!"[7]

With enough time we could read the entire encyclopedic and philosophical drama of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* as a garrulous development of the *Nota Bene* addressed to Loulou, and would be justified in so doing not only by what Flaubert himself said: "I am so filled with Bouvard and Pécuchet that I have become them. Their stupidity is my stupidity; I am bursting with it!" I return to the *Nota Bene,* which also begins with the question of matter and spirit:

> My Loulou. . . . As for my opinion on these matters, here it is in a word: I don't know what the two substantives, *Matter* and *Spirit,* mean; we don't know the one any better than the other. Perhaps they are only abstractions of our intellect. In short, I consider Materialism and Spiritualism *equally impertinent.*
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> Ask Monseigneur to lend you Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedo,* in Cousin's translation. Since you love the ideal, my Loulou, you will discover it, in these books, at its very source. As art, it's marvellous.

Be it in a word or in five clauses, time enough for a quip, it is tempting to read this passage as making a scene over Philosophy; the letter in any event lays down directional arrows through a space we would have to decipher if we wanted to discover not what Flaubert's *own* philosophy was, nor what philosophy was *for* him, but rather a relationship to philosophy resembling not an indivisible line but many, divisible ones, the systematization of which would, by definition, be out of the question. An arrowing and some lines, because the irony of the stroke marks the entire scene; there is, together with each bit of drawing, a withdrawing, a distanciation

[7] The exchange takes place in the context of a passage on the imagination of the prophets and on the idolatry of visions and of figurative language: "—He is going to deny the prophets now! —Not at all! But in the heat of excitement they saw Jehovah in different forms, as a fire, as a bush, an old man, a dove, and they were not certain of Revelation for they were always asking for a sign. —Ah! and you discovered these fine things. . . . —In Spinoza!"

in a space that was not homogeneous and empty. This space is part of a determined, differentiated potentiality, a historical or historiated potentiality that *bears Flaubert's signature.* This potentiality is inseparable from what is called the Idea; if it bears the signature of Flaubert, that can mean of course that it is signed with the name "Flaubert," a proper name and an idiom that we cannot simply erase, reduce, or deduce in this context. But it can also mean that for us this name, and the idea it evokes, are borne by an era. I am attempting here to speak of that which, bearing this signature, pertains to philosophy.

For the sake of economy, I have chosen to recognize the features of this signature in the *Nota Bene* of a letter. There we see, for example, that Flaubert prefers substantives to concepts. "Matter" and "spirit" are first treated as words. This verbal activity, this verbosity is perhaps the sign of a fetishism that Flaubert initially challenges. Perhaps he does so as a nominalist vaguely reminiscent of Condillac, but one who reproduces a properly philosophical line of argument that is historically attributable and classified by type. Flaubert had an expert command of these things, which he would develop and catalogue in *Bouvard and Pécuchet* at the moment his protagonists, pursuing the question of matter and spirit, "tackled the origin of ideas." This is the central phase of a philosophical drama they play out between themselves, and which is ultimately a drama of the Idea. In the search for answers to the question of matter and spirit, they are obliged to review all the arguments on the origin of ideas, and specifically of representative ideas (such as, for example, those of matter and spirit). It is in the course of this inspection that, among other arguments, they mention the risks of "abstraction" and of "using words incorrectly," those very risks Flaubert had suggested to Loulou. The encyclopedic grand tour of Messrs. Bouvard and Pécuchet, Philosophers, is so clearly a "grand tourism" of the Idea that, after having picked apart the doctrines of the representative idea and its origins, they must proceed to the Hegelian Idea. They had in the meantime run across Cousin.[8] Pécuchet acquires an introduction to Hegelian philosophy and explains it to Bouvard. "The only thing that is real is the idea," he tells him. And to the curé who passes, clutching his breviary: "No religion has so firmly established this truth: 'Nature is only a

[8] "As for evidence, denied by some, affirmed by others, it is its own criterion. Monsieur Cousin demonstrated that."

moment of the idea!' " With an exclamation point, the likes of which should never punctuate a philosophical proposition. Bouvard and Pécuchet "are" philosophy with an exclamation point. " 'A moment of the idea!' murmured the priest, stupefied."

A second characteristic of the *Nota Bene:* insofar as this nominalism entails a certain empiricism (another coded argument), matter and spirit, or rather the ideas of matter and spirit, correspond to no essences whatsoever. The idea—and the same could be said of the idea of the idea—is only a word associated with an abstraction of the intellect. The uncle says "perhaps" to his niece, to his sister or to her daughter; with a hint of skepticism, this "perhaps" diffuses the somewhat negative hypotheses brought together in two sentences (this nominalism as an agnosticism or phenomenalism, an empiricism or subjectivism: I don't know what those two words mean, matter is no better known than spirit; "perhaps they are only abstractions of our intellect"). But Loulou is rapidly appraised of the conclusion; in this game which throws one system against the other, it is all a matter of tempo. Quickly, the conclusion brings out the uncle's opinion in a word: "In short," he says, "I find Materialism and Spiritualism equally impertinent." In short, he dismisses back to back the two opposable arguments, the two oppositions, concluding (stupidly therefore) that he does not want to conclude (that indeed would be too stupid). He dismisses the arguments with a "neither . . . nor" that is not so much the syntax of heuristic hesitation as a jump beyond an opposition perceived as fundamentally out of date, worn out and exhausted—too accepted [*reçu*] to be still admissible [*recevable*], or too admissible to remain interesting. Like Bouvard and Pécuchet, he admits to himself that he is "tired of philosophers." Philosophy's code seems to have reached its limit, while its history appears sealed: the combinations and permutations of its systems are too well known. To strut about professing materialism or spiritualism are henceforth acts of equal impertinence, the word intending both a naive incompetence and the insolence of giving an answer where no answer is called for, that monumental arrogance—and for Flaubert, stupidity is always monumental,[9] equal in size to a stone monument

[9] "Stupidity is immovable; nothing attacks it without shattering against it. It has the character of granite, hard and strong. In Alexandria, a Mr. Thompson of Sunderland wrote his name on Pompey's Pillar in letters six feet high. There is no way to see the pillar without seeing Thompson's name, and without consequently thinking of Thompson. The cretin has incorporated himself into the monument,

covered with inscriptions—of those who seriously pass themselves off as materialists or spiritualists, who link their names to a system when, like children, they don't even know what the grand words "matter" and "spirit" really mean.

Several gestures intermingle here. First, there is a gluttonous interest for philosophy (to a degree seldom found in writers of the time), an eagerness to study philosophy, to interrogate its systems, to learn, like Bouvard and Pécuchet, their constitutive arguments, their techniques and their rhetoric, but always at a certain distance, from an exterior position that has been deliberately staked out but also imposed in some way. Then, with what appears to be a mixture of bookish or autodidactic artlessness and mannered (i.e., too old) culture, Flaubert makes two concurrent gestures. With one hand he turns philosophy's arguments against itself, playing one philosophical system or typology against the other with the agility *and* heavy-handedness of the self-taught expert who has quickly learned to mimic the artist's or the philosopher/prestidigitator's manipulation. But with his other hand, the tired one, he signals his withdrawal from the philosophical game; no one party-line is worth more than another; oppositions are impertinent. Thus he maps out a movement beyond Philosophy and the Philosopher. How is this movement possible (in his pronouncements, but also in the so-called literary work)? How does it come to terms with the other one? And what can produce this accommodation within the history, and *beneath* the signature of Flaubert, understood as that which bears it? This is the question I would at least have liked to broach under the heading of Flaubert's idea.

Again I would refer to the *Nota Bene* of the letter to Loulou, and more specifically to the second paragraph, which recommends two Platonic dialogues. And not just any two. The *Symposium* and the *Phaedo* present love, the Beautiful, and the system of the Ideas in their purest, most dualistic, and—one might say—most ideal

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and perpetuates himself along with it" (letter cited by J.-P. Richard, *Littérature et sensation,* 233). When elsewhere he says that "masterpieces are stupid" ("... they have the same tranquil look as the products of nature, like large animals and the mountains," to L. Colet, June 26–27, 1852), we might also think of the stony, monumental resistance they can offer to history. The proper name incorporates itself in the masterpiece; this is not an insignificant gain to be derived from this speculation on stupidity.

forms. "Since you love the ideal," as Flaubert himself says, advising Loulou to have someone lend her "idealism" (which is neither materialism nor spiritualism) in Victor Cousin's translation; Cousin, whom in the letters to Louise he dubs the Philosopher, and occasionally even Plato;[10] whose work he himself had dispatched, and whose own dispatch he had had Louise forward to him (she, moreover, had led Cousin to think he was the father of her daughter, Henriette Colet; another epistolary diversion, another dissemination to be treated all the less anecdotally with regard to Flaubert's work since that work was produced within confines from which Flaubert could write: "I don't want a child *of my own*. . . . I love my little niece as if she were my daughter . . ." [to Louise Colet, April 22, 1854]; and, furthermore, since Louise's miscarriage, in the first weeks of their affair, inspired Flaubert to write a letter expressing profound relief, and which therefore must be read attentively in this connection. After having said that he liked the "idea" of "absolute nothingness" and would rather forgo posterity, he speeds to Cousin's rescue: "Why do you spurn the good philosopher with such cruel harshness that he is made to feel the slight and then reproaches you for it? What's the poor fellow done to deserve such mistreatment?" [September 15–16, 1846]. This is Flaubert's version; to add a final twist to this labyrinth of epistolary diversions, it turns out that Louise's letters ended up in the hands of Loulou.) The scene is all the more overdetermined inasmuch as Flaubert's aggressive irony towards the Philosopher as a past or potential rival is never free of a certain indebted respect. He refers Louise to Cousin's authority, as though the Philosopher and the writer were bound by an inviolable pact, which could not be altered by their relations with a woman, even with a woman of letters. Though

[10] To Louise Colet, September 22, 1846: "What a good man, that mailman! I left orders in the kitchen that he be given a glass of wine to quench his thirst. . . . Yesterday he brought me nothing, so he got nothing! You send me everything you can find to flatter my affection; you throw all the tributes others pay you at my feet. I read Plato's letter with all the concentration I could muster. I saw a great deal in it, a great, great deal; he is a man whose heart, whatever he may do to make it appear serene, is essentially cold and empty; his life is bleak . . . but he has loved you very much, and still loves you with a deep and solitary love; he will keep it alive a long time. His letter made me suffer. . . . As a rule the philospher is a kind of mongrel being, a cross between the scientist and the poet, and envious of both. Metaphysics puts a lot of rancor in the blood. It is odd and entertaining; I worked at it in earnest for two years, but now I regret the time wasted. . . ."

Flaubert is often merciless towards the Philospher, he refers Louise nonetheless to the teachings of her former lover, precisely to those dealing with the Idea, and above all the Idea of the purely Beautiful, which, according to Flaubert, women have difficulty in grasping because they invariably adulterate it with a desire for what is pleasant or useful. In theory, no consistent analysis of Flaubert's relationship to philosophy and to the philosopher could avoid his pronouncements on woman (whom he qualifies as "an impossible thing"[11]) and on sexual difference, particularly all the evaluations that characterize his poetics—or rather, the figuration of his poetics. He loves, as he puts it, "sentences as taut as an athlete's biceps" (to Louise Colet, June 6–7, 1853) and "above all the sentence [that is] vigorous, substantial, and clear, whose skin is swarthy and whose muscles bulge . . . male sentences, not female ones like those of Lamartine," who "lacks balls" and "has never pissed anything but pure water."[12] Speaking of Art and the Beautiful, the only thing that he "admires and values," Flaubert "scolds" Louise and directs her to his, or her, Philosopher: "*You* adulterate the Beautiful with things that are foreign to it, with the useful, the pleasant, and who knows what else? You must tell the Philosopher to explain the idea of pure Beauty to you as he expounded it in his course of 1819, and as I conceive it" (September 13, 1846, some two days before the loss of her child).[13] Cousin the Philosopher is more than just a mediating figure in the duel played out here between Gustave and Louise; he also plays the role of *messenger,*

[11] "The woman strikes me as an impossible thing; the more I study her, the less I understand. I've stayed out of her way as much as I could. She is an abyss that entices and terrifies me. Besides, I think one of the causes of the moral weakness of the 19th century is our exaggerated *poeticization* of the woman. In this way, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception seems to me a stroke of political genius on the part of the Church. It gave expression to all the feminine aspirations of the era, then annulled them, to the Church's benefit. The writer doesn't exist who has not exalted mother, wife, or mistress. —A generation overcome with pain now weeps like a sick child in the lap of its women. No one realizes *how fainthearted men are with them!*

"So that, to avoid living, I desperately steep myself in Art; I get drunk on 'ink as others do on wine' . . ." (to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie, December 18, 1859).

[12] "They say Lamartine is dying. I shan't be mourning. . . . What he leaves behind won't get him a eunuch for a ghost; he lacks balls; he has never pissed more than pure water" (to Louise Colet, April 6, 1853). The succession of ideas is curious and could, given more time, be confronted with a certain Hegelian reflection on the oneness of the canal through which both sperm and urine flow, substances Hegel likens respectively to conceptual thought and representation.

[13] Elsewhere: "From this I conclude, following old Mr. Cousin, that the Beautiful is only intended for some forty people a century in Europe."

understood as a translator in both the broad and narrow senses of that term. He is the eclectic philosopher who assimilates and delivers tradition (to Flaubert, to Bouvard, and to Pécuchet). He is the translator of Plato; that is, of the first great thinker of the Idea, whose name Flaubert bestowed upon him as a nickname. He is also the translator or letter-carrier [*facteur*] in France of the last great thinker of the Idea, namely Hegel. Flaubert read him. From Plato to Hegel, a certain history of the Idea, as well as of the word "idea," unfolds, fixes its own destiny, and seals itself off; without this history, there would be no chance of acceding to that which bears the signature "Flaubert," above all when that signature is inscribed across the word "idea," which is remarkable for its frequency and singular usage in Flaubert's discourse, and which modifies or modulates its meaning according to its context. One form of the question could be as follows: What does it mean (what is it that still wishes to mean, what is it that has already ceased to mean, or simply can no longer mean) when Flaubert allows himself, quite literally, to be besieged by the word "idea," all the while, whether he thematizes the term or not, never making a theme of *this very question?* There are hundreds of citations attesting to the fact that Flaubert mobilizes, according to various contexts, the full range of semantic resources bequeathed him by the histories of philosophy and language, and then, as if through an invisible leap the idea surpassed the idea, he seemingly uses it to name a certain X, which may no longer belong to those histories.

In this sense, through the curious proximity of a post-Hegelian to Hegel, and to an Idea which holds within itself an entire Platonic-Hegelian destiny, Flaubert occupies a position not incomparable to that of Mallarmé—a comparison which is not, it should be said, meant to minimalize the essential differences between them, beginning with a certain idea of prose or of verse. Both authors are inscribed in a locus of philosophical exhaustion, wherein they can no longer order their literary writing, their art if you wish, according to a philosophical system or position and so must continue to manipulate philosophemes as a sort of metalanguage instrumental to the display of their writing. They resort then to the philosophical forms best suited to express both this limit and this exemplary impossibility, to a simulacrum of the dialectic and of the idea in both its Platonic and Hegelian guises, a simulacrum which would allow them to reassemble the philosophical, marking its limits as they discredit its oppositions, which are none other

than the philosophical concepts themselves (*neither* materialism *nor* spiritualism, but also *neither/nor* so many other things). In any given context provided by Mallarmé or Flaubert, the word "Idea" mimics the Platonic-Hegelian Idea while at the same time emptying it of its metaphysical or dialectical content, wearing it down to the negative sublimity of the Mallarméan Book or the book about nothing, which one might call the book-about-nothing-of-Flaubert. Let us not forget that this "book about nothing" of which he speaks to Louise Colet is not simply an ideal book; it is the book of that ideality which is no longer anything at all. The Beautiful (all the more beautiful "the less (subject) matter [*matière*] there is"), "the future of art," the "liberation from materiality" through a "prose" that "becomes attenuated":[14] all that these formulations really do is pass through a certain formalism of the idea so as to manifest themselves, but then immediately cross over that formalism toward a "nothing" [*un rien*] that stands alone beyond oppositions, as for example between form and matter, form and content, and so on. The idea of the idea, the word "idea," remains the philosophical translation of a non-philosophical text.[15] Philosophy has taken place; there is nothing more to be expected of it; it has already saturated our culture and its own field of action. All that remains to be done, so as ultimately to do something else, is perhaps to receive it as an enormous legacy of received ideas, to read it and to translate it. Our only delay with respect to this philosophy that has taken place is a delay in translation. I am reminded of Flaubert's well-known remark on the translation of Hegel. He speaks above all of the devastation that critical discourses can bring in their capacity as philosophical discourses on aesthetics, art or literature, in this way comparable to the metalanguage of a regent who claims that his own word is the law: "Plautus would have laughed at Aristotle had he known him! Corneille struggled under his authority. Voltaire, despite himself, felt the pinch of Boileau! Had it not been for Schlegel, we should have been spared much that's bad in modern drama; and God knows where we're headed

[14] To Louise Colet, January 16, 1852, and September 30, 1853.

[15] So difficult is it to "propose to people a language *in which they have never thought.*" I am shifting and deforming the most evident meaning of this sentence. In his letter to Feydeau (end of October, 1858), Flaubert speaks of the impossible task of describing Carthage, of which "nothing is known." In its generality, however, the formula also moves in another direction, towards the senseless and the impossible of which I am speaking here. Two lines earlier, Flaubert had said: "Since the beginning of literature, no one has undertaken anything so senseless."

when the translation of Hegel is finished!"[16] The translation of Hegel, or in other words the unfettered deployment of its historical reception, will be the end of everything: of literature and of art, of a literature entirely subjected to, and sterilized by, philosophy's regency, a literature which for the moment owes the little bit of life it has left to those not-yet-translated nooks in Hegel. With regard to the yet-untranslated Hegel, it should be recalled that Victor Cousin, the Philosopher and self-imputed father of Louise's daughter, had himself in a letter implored Hegel to impregnate France with his ideas, "to implant in the bowels of the nation some of those productive seeds that develop naturally there. . . . I feel myself strong enough to carry the load. . . . Hegel, tell me the truth. I shall then pass on to my country as much as it can comprehend" (August 1, 1826). The reign of Hegel would mean the unlimited dominion of a certain idea, but at the same time, as paradoxical as this might appear, it would perhaps open up the passage toward that literature or that writing which Flaubert calls Art. Philosophy having reached its end (or its ends), it can still play a role, for one can then both cease to give it credit, even discredit it, and/or, in what amounts to the same thing, one can treat it as an art and read the great philosophers as artists. This is the end of the *Nota Bene.* Flaubert praises Plato for Loulou who loves the ideal: "As art," the uncle tells her, "it's marvellous." Twelve years later he will tell her that "ethics are only a sub-division of Aesthetics" and, in the same letter, announce that he has no doubts about the "philosophical import" of *Bouvard and Pécuchet.*

And now a fiction to *conclude,* and thus to give myself up to stupidity itself. Imagine that I proposed to you a table listing all Flaubert's uses of the word "idea" (I have some 666 citations here at hand). First of all, I would classify all the apparently trivial, inattentive, or simply operative uses; for example, with the meaning of "content": "as to *ideas* (which I don't think very important), it will be less lofty than *Saint Antoine,* but perhaps it will be tauter and more unusual, without appearing so" (to Louise Colet, 2/8/52); or with the meaning of a human representation, e.g.: "Religion is . . . a matter of human invention, in short an idea"—as opposed to faith which is a "feeling" (to Louise Colet, 3/31/53); accordingly "ideas are facts" that can be described and

[16] October 14, 1846. And much later, from a different point of view: ". . . Art must never serve as a pulpit for any doctrine whatsoever, on pain of degradation! . . ." (to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie, October 23, 1863).

catalogued (1/15/53) etc., etc. In another taxonomic schema I would place those 666 cases where the word "Idea," often capitalized, is the theme, indeed the hero of the discourse; this time denoting neither a "representation" nor a "content," but rather a "pure idea" working on the side of a form and an art which themselves become their own content, but which from that moment on are neither opposed to content nor belong to any opposition of philosophical concepts. For example, and in no particular order: "for men of our breed, happiness is in the idea, and nowhere else" (to Le Poittevin, September 1845): ". . . now more than ever I retire into the pure idea, into infinity. . . . I am going a bit mad" (to Du Camp, April 7, 1856); ". . . yes, work hard, love art. Still, of all lies, this one lies the least. . . . the idea alone is eternal and necessary . . ." (to Louise Colet, 8/9/46); ". . . you will not extract the form from the Idea, for the Idea exists only by virtue of its form. Try to imagine an idea having no form—it's impossible, just as impossible as a form that would not express an idea. Such are the stupidities upon which criticism feeds" (to Louise Colet, 9/18/46). "One must write as little as possible, and then only to assuage the irritation caused by the Idea, which revolves about in our minds, demanding to take form" (to Louise Colet, 12/13/46); "My only goal . . . is to realize the idea, and I think my work would lose all its *meaning* in being published . . ." (to Louise Colet, 8/16/46); "The question of style . . . excites my nerves most terribly. . . . I find I am incapable of rendering the *Idea*" (to Louise Colet, 10/2/46). In all these examples—dating from the 1840s and 1850s—the Idea, in a way that conforms to several philosophical projects, is at once content in search of its form and already form itself, a state of affairs that would merit its own place in a philosophical genealogy if what Flaubert calls Art, as the locus of the Idea and not as a moment of the idea, did not designate a space other than the philosophical, and hence, in the name of the Idea, something other than this dialectic of form and content. Thus: "Where Form is in fact absent the idea no longer exists. . . . They are as inseparable as a substance and its color, and that is why Art is truth itself. Watered down over twenty lectures at the Collège de France, all this would make a bevy of humble students, clever gentlemen, and distinguished ladies take me for a great man for two weeks" (to Louise Colet, 5/23/52); "Life is such a hideous affair that the only way to endure it is to avoid it. You avoid it by living through Art, in a constant quest for the True as rendered by the Beautiful" (to

Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie, 5/18/57). Elsewhere: "I am morally *beautiful.* But I think I'm becoming stupid, intellectually speaking" (to Feydeau, Sept.-Oct., 1860). We cannot conclude with these propositions on Art as a Truth for the avoidance of Life nor even dwell upon them—as one might do for example in a joint reading of analogous propositions, at once similar and different, from Nietzsche or Valéry; and all the less so since Flaubert elsewhere calls this Truth into play again in a sort of perspectivism and antinaturalism of writing. Two examples: "A fervor for the *idea* robbed them [the poets of the 16th century] of all feeling for nature. Their poetics was antiphysical" (to Taine, 12/20/65); or again, "This mania for believing that nature has just recently been discovered and that we are truer than our predecessors exasperates me. Racine's *tempest* is every bit as true as Michelet's. There is no Truth! There are only ways of seeing. Does a photograph resemble its model? No more so than an oil portrait, or just as much. Down with all the Schools! Down with meaningless words! Down with Academies, Poetics, Principles!" (to L. Hennique, 2/3/80).

This very perspectivism precludes our establishing a truth of the Idea; it precludes the very possibility that, behind all these rule-governed variations, behind all these contexts (and there are many more to be found), the invariable truth of an idea of the idea might impose itself as law. The desire for such an idea of the idea would still be philosophical, even if it meant seeking this truth of the idea as a primal or paradigmatic scene (for example, the scene of negativity or resentment in an art of the idea that would shelter us from life) or as the scene of a guilt-ridden indebtedness to the idea: for example when Flaubert refuses to "divert the least thing" from Art, in what would be "nearly a crime," a "theft from the idea" (to Louise Colet, 8/22/53); or again when he speaks of his use of received ideas as an act of literary and moral vengeance (". . . I shall have taken my literary *revenge* [in the projected preface to an edition of Ronsard], just as in the *Dictionary of Received Ideas* I shall avenge myself morally . . . ," to Louise Colet, 9/7/53); or when he speaks of the idea as an instrument of power and torture, both for oneself and for others, in this famous letter to Louise Colet: "It is splendid to be a great writer, to hold men in the frying pan of your sentences and sauté them like chestnuts. There must be a delirious pride in the feeling that you are bringing the full weight of your idea to bear on mankind." But it is true that, in this sentence about sentences, the idea is still conceived of as a content,

for Flaubert continues, as if taking back all his aggressivity: "But for that you must have something to say. Now, I will confess to you that I seem to have nothing that others don't. . . . Art . . . is perhaps no more serious than a game of ninepins" (11/3/51).

Through all these scenes, perspectives and multiple contexts of the idea, through the dialectical or aesthetic movements of negativity, the resentment against life ("I hate life," to M. Du Camp, 10/21/51), the vengeance, indebtedness, duty, and impotence, what remains—and furthermore in a sense which may no longer refer back to the philosophical idea—is an affirmation that is the subject of no declaration, no metalinguistic discourse, no reference to philosophy. Perhaps this affirmation, which I have described in vaguely Nietzschean terms, had to come to terms with an idea of the idea that occupies no simple place on the Platonic-Hegelian continuum—I mean Spinoza's idea, which neither is nor gives rise to a representation, mimetic or otherwise, nor to any idea of the idea, and which Spinoza rightly contrasts with tradition, most notably the Cartesian idea, as an act or affirmation contrasts with a reproductive copy, and even its model. This hypothesis may be reckless: while he accords Spinoza a place quite apart from, and above, the body of philosophers, Flaubert never, to my knowledge, refers to the Spinozist idea as such. But this silence should not deter us, for without that idea the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus* are inconceivable and unreadable. If I conclude with Flaubert's silence in this matter, it is because the affirmative power of such an idea gave rise to no eloquent declaration on its own behalf, as I said a moment ago. That idea merges with his act of writing, his literature, his very work.

Will I have time for an epilogue?

This epilogue or envoy would also be a dedication to my friend, Eugenio Donato, with whom last year in California I began to read Flaubert differently.

Who is Flaubert's idea? Perhaps you would be tempted to render the grammar of my question in these words, and more boldly still to answer with a proper name or the fragment of a proper name or the endless transference between scraps of an identity not yet named. We can hear someone whisper: Flaubert's idea is Loulou, between Caroline and Louise; but first it is Caroline, the dead sister, the impossible thing.[17]

[17] See Eugenio Donato, "Who Signs Flaubert?" in the present issue.

I first chose as my title "The Idea of Flaubert."

The definite article was sanctioned by the author who so often says "the idea," who claims that "happiness . . . is in the idea," that he "retires . . . into the pure idea," that "only the idea is eternal and necessary," that "Art and Religion" are the "two great manifestations of the Idea," and so on.

Why did I finally choose instead the indefinite article, "An Idea of Flaubert"? No doubt to moderate my intent, which amounts to a modest presentation of an idea of Flaubert. One of them, from among other possible ones. But I was also obliged to do justice to a single sentence, a sentence I should have liked to inscribe in the rock of all that is petrified at the edge of the cadaver of Caroline, Loulou's mother and namesake. That is why I have been preparing the stone upon which one is always stupid enough to carve a name, the "pillar" "of strong, hard granite." Seated by his sister's death-bed, Flaubert wrote letters: ". . . my mother is a statue that weeps . . ."; "my eyes are as dry as marble . . ."; and after the burial: "I felt the lead bend in my hands. It was I who molded it. I saw the great paws of those boors touching her and covering her with plaster. I shall have her hand and her face. . . . I was as tearless as a tomb-stone" (to M. Du Camp, March 25, 1846).

I will now pronounce this sentence. In it you will admire the passage from the indefinite to the definite, and especially from the singular to the plural, apparent effects of a most lucid carelessness. In it the translation is unerring; like the stone itself, it needs to be made to speak; it tells of Flaubert's relentless chase, of what set him on the track of "the impossible thing." This sentence serves as advice, a precept, an imperative and a lamentation, also as a gesture of compassion for a friend in mourning (Feydeau, November 12–15, 1859):

. . . hunt down an idea! at least those women do not deceive and do not die!

Flaubert often exhorted his friends, and even gave courage to himself by reciting an ominous yet joyous phrase of Goethe's that he found "sublime": "*beyond the graves and onward.*"[18] From this phrase, moreover, he admitted to not expecting the least consolation.

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[18] For example, the letter to Edmond de Goncourt (beginning of July, 1870).